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JOINT INSPECTION UNIT

Managing works of art in the United Nations

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to submit to the General Assembly his comments on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Managing works of art in the United Nations" (JIU/REP/92/7-A/48/72, annex).

* A/48/50.

ANNEX

Comments of the Secretary-General

I. GENERAL

1. The basic premise of the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) (A/48/72, annex), that is, to compare the collection of art in the United Nations to national collections in major museums, does not appear appropriate. The only comparator that the Inspectors cite that could have some relevance would be the Organization of American States (OAS). But even then one must recognize that while OAS is a diverse organization, there is none the less a certain degree of homogeneity in its membership. The contrary is the case in the United Nations.

2. The United Nations is not involved in an active programme of acquisition. Rather, it is the repository of donations from individual Member States as well as other organizations. As such, and by its very definition, the collection of art is diverse, representing the multicultural atmosphere of the Organization and its Member States; and therein lies its intrinsic value.

3. The monetary value, unlike in a museum involved in an active acquisition and de-acquisition programme, is at most only a secondary issue. The only time that the monetary value would enter into the equation is if the Organization were to cease to exist. Since the latter development would have far more important ramifications, the minor problem of selling off works of art at that point would pale by comparison.

4. The opinion expressed in paragraph 4 of the report - that the artistic and historical objects need special care, conservation and protection - is fully shared. It is evident that the Organization and the personnel of the Secretariat do not possess the expertise necessary to review conservation needs of the various gifts of works of art, and this does need to be addressed. Whether it should be addressed in the terms defined by the Inspectors, is another matter.

5. In paragraph 8 the Inspectors quote the Secretary-General's report on management and maintenance of United Nations premises (A/45/796) and in particular cite paragraphs 22 and 23. Those paragraphs reinforce the point on the diverse nature of the collection of art works. If the General Assembly had wanted to take up the question of the need to develop a programme of evaluation, conservation and protection, it could have done so at the time.

6. In paragraph 9 of the report the notion of coherent acquisition is raised once again. There has never been a coherent acquisition policy in the United Nations even during the active functioning of the Arts Committee. Even with the thoughtful review of donations, there were still a considerable number of unsolicited gifts which the terms of the Arts Committee at that time - namely, one gift per nation - made it very hard to refuse.

7. The comment that there is no vision to guide the purpose and direction of what has come to be a collection of considerable interest makes it necessary to

bring back the general premise stated in paragraph 2 above, that the United Nations is not involved in an active programme of acquisition. The United Nations plays an essentially passive role, which is to accept or reject donations by Member States. The only area where active policy could apply is in the Philatelic Museum at Geneva, where the concepts and precepts of a museum collection do play a role, namely, a coherent acquisition and de-acquisition policy and a vision to guide the direction of the collection.

8. If there is a purpose to the collection of works of art in the United Nations, then it should be to reflect the different styles and diverse nature of the membership of the Organization. This the collection does already and it could not be artificially engineered. At most the Organization can and does advocate certain very general criteria, such as the desirability of small gifts (preferably original works, objects or artefacts) which can be readily displayed, and the need to consult with the Arts Committee prior to finalizing a donation. But Member States do not necessarily follow these requirements.

II. SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Recommendation one

9. In regard to paragraph 11 (1) of the report of JIU, there is no objection to creating a context within which management actions can be taken with consistency and timeliness.

10. In regard to paragraph 11 (2) of the report, the institutionalizing of the management of works of art does not appear advisable as that can make it cumbersome. The strengths of the existing arts policy are that it is not institutionalized and is a rather flexible, pragmatic approach to a very difficult subject. This in itself is touched on by paragraph 11 (3) of the report in reference to the defining of gifts as inappropriate, which is extremely difficult and entirely subjective. The only aspect of a gift which yields to such definition and subsequent refusal of a donation is where there would be an undue burden on the United Nations budget for conservation.

Recommendation two

11. The recommendation to strengthen the Arts Committee is accepted. However, in regard to the observation in paragraph 13 of the report that the weakness of the current Arts Committee is its advisory status, it is doubtful that the Secretary-General could appoint any Arts Committee that was not advisory to him (by definition any committee whose membership is subject to appointment is in an advisory capacity to the appointer). As for the suggestion that the Arts Committee with a different status might be able to shield the Secretary-General from political pressures to accept unwanted or inappropriate gifts, that appears highly unlikely given the intergovernmental nature of the Organization. Regarding the terms of reference of the Arts Committee, the intention is to revive them as originally drafted.

12. Paragraph 19 of the report touches on the suggested composition of the Arts Committee. There are numerous practical problems in accepting this suggestion. Were the Arts Committee to include the artistic experts as recommended, then the

diversity would not be achieved without recruiting them from the various regions of the world. Thus, the comment in paragraph 20 that the operational costs would be minimal certainly does not apply, since such experts would undoubtedly require first-class travel to and from their sites of origin and their meetings certainly would not be limited to one or two days a year. Another option for the Committee presumably to be constituted at Headquarters is to cull the artistic experts from the surrounding community, which may invite criticism that it is culturally biased. To avoid these complications, it is preferable to continue the Arts Committee as an internal committee of the Organization.

13. Although the recommendation that the secretariat of the Arts Committee be drawn from the Buildings Management Service (BMS) in the Office of General Services (OGS) is acceptable in principle, this will require the establishment of a separate unit with at least one Professional and one General Service staff to manage, administer and maintain the United Nations gifts, and closely interact with the United Nations Arts Committee. Again, since this is for practical purposes a full-time job it is clear that there are unavoidable additional operational costs associated with the implementation of such a unit.

Recommendation three

14. The Secretary-General fully agrees with the need to develop a complete and comprehensive registry of the works of art, as well as to identify those requiring special conservation measures. This would require the selection or development of an automated inventory system and a systematic programme of registering all items currently under United Nations control, and it would also be necessary to describe the current condition of the works of art and assess the repair and maintenance costs of these items.

15. On the question of evaluation, it is believed that such evaluation would require extensive expertise in the various disciplines that the United Nations art forms represent. Given this factor and the underlying sensitivities of donors to comparisons of the worth of a work of art that they have given to the United Nations, such an exercise could be difficult to accomplish.

16. On the question of insurance, with the exception of those articles which were specifically lent to the Organization, and which under the terms of the loan agreement require the United Nations to cover them with insurance, the art works donated by Member States form part of the unscheduled items of property covered under the Headquarters All-Risk Property Insurance programme. Pay-outs under that policy in the event of loss are subject to a deductible of $100,000. In paragraph 30 of the report, it is suggested that an evaluation of at least some of the pieces of art could be carried out by "insurance companies". In practice, this suggestion is not feasible. If an insurance company not currently doing business with the United Nations had art evaluation expertise, such services would have to be contracted without any commitment that the company concerned would necessarily be awarded the insurance contract. Moreover, it does not seem likely that evaluations carried out by an insurance company can be relied on for objectivity. If special coverage, either in the form of an endorsement to the existing all-risk property insurance policy or in the form of a separate policy, were to be taken out for the United Nations art works, the estimation of the valuations for insurance purposes should be carried out by qualified independent appraisers. However, there is hardly any need to

pursue the question of insurance of the works of art. Rather, given the uniqueness of most of the works, the Secretary-General is of the opinion that by and large the art collection of the United Nations is irreplaceable and as such, should be self-insured.

17. On the question of conservation, it is strongly believed that the donor should remain responsible for conservation, as was the procedure followed in the past.

Recommendation four

18. The Inspectors suggest engaging a professional curator to assure the relevance, coherence and value of the United Nations collection. None of that appears to be applicable. As was adduced above, the relevance of the United Nations collection is in the diversity of the art; and this is, indeed, its coherence. If by value of the collection the Inspectors mean the physical preservation, then a curator is not required solely for that purpose. Rather a periodic review of the works of art by BMS should identify physical deterioration. In such cases the donor Government would be contacted for advice with an indication that if such help is not forthcoming, the work of art will be removed from display.